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Tool 10: Throwing Stuff Against A Wall

Think of this as the last refuge of sane plot building. (We'll start insane plot-building in **Section II: When Things Go Splat.**) You use this technique to insert bits of real life, serendipity, and magic into your plot.

There are three steps to **Throwing Stuff Against A Wall**, and two of them are as easy as falling down a well. The third involves getting out of the well, frequently while blindfolded and with your hands tied behind your back, and so is a tiny bit harder. But anyway, here are the steps.

- **Step One: Get stuff.**
- **Step Two: Throw stuff.**
- **Step Three: Make sense of stuff.**

Get Stuff

Time to go scavenger hunting. Drag out magazines; hook up to the Internet and randomly surf, saving links to five or six pages you find interesting; grab a few newspapers from the local newsstand or racks; pull a handful of nonfiction books (do it straight from your bookshelves with your eyes closed for double fun and extra points), pull out old family photo albums. Get your camera and walk around taking pictures of items that catch your eye—falling-down buildings, strangely-dressed people, public sculptures, cool architectural details, great gardens, horrible lawns, the yards of people who decorated for Christmas as if they owned the local power company, rivers, streams, junkyards, anything that made you turn your head and look.

Throw Stuff

Get your three-ring binder and hole punch, some paper, and some glue. If you have a copier or scanner, get it. If you need to go to a copy place for copies, now's the time to go. Take your toys with you.

- **Cut out newspaper articles that catch your attention.** Not ones that catch your attention as being sort of related to your book...just ones that make you stop and look at them. Sports scores, garden club news, a random killing that made the front page, the Chamber of Commerce droning on about the new industrial park or the little accident with too much fluoride in the drinking water (eep!)—whatever. Copy them, or cut and paste them, one article per page, on sheets of your paper. Hole-punch and file these articles in the ring binder.
- **Print off interesting pages from those internet sites you found.** These are for your personal use so copying the pages and filing them in your notebook is not a violation of copyright, but if you end up quoting from a site, you should give an author credit and a site link-back in your acknowledgments.
- **Go through nonfiction books and, again, make note of things you think are cool.** Write down book titles, page numbers and topics you liked, and file these in your ring binder, or if you have your own copier or scanner, go ahead and copy, then file in your ring binder. Again, these are for your own personal use and are from books you already own—copying is for your convenience in keeping research material together, not to acquire copies of books you don't own. As a librarian what constitutes fair use if you want to make copies from library books. Hang on to titles, authors, and details of the books printing and copyright information in case you use the material and need to include acknowledgments or bibliography notes.

- **From those old pictures, find pictures of people you don't quite recognize doing things you can't exactly identify.** Scan, copy, or otherwise reproduce these pictures, one to a sheet of paper, hole-punch and file them.
- **Clip odd pictures (including those from advertising) and interesting articles or ads from magazines, or copy them.** Again, hang on to bibliographical data in case you need it later. Writing it down now will save you from having to dump a great quote or interesting factoid because you can't relocate the magazine, or even remember which magazine it was.
- **Copy the best pictures from your weird photo trip.** *Best* is not most artistic. *Best* is whichever five or ten pictures give you a little shiver in your gut, or fill your head with questions, when you get them home and look at them.

Make Sense of Stuff

Blithely and jauntily drag out your Muse. The Muse not in a blithe and jaunty mood? Drag it out by the hair if you must.

Look at your first item, and start asking yourself questions.

For example:

- How was one of my characters involved in this?
- Where did he see it?
- Where and when did he do it?
- Where in my story's time and place does it exist?
- In what ways are my characters affiliated with commercial salmon fishing, the nude beach near Saint-Tropez, an all-organic free-range cattle operation in Montana, the lion fish